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Advancing Women In Leadership

Rebalancing the Scale between the Personal and the Professional

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Work-life conflicts are hardly new, even in academia. Amelia Earhart, in a letter to her future husband, George Putnam, wrote of "her reluctance to marry, my feeling that I shatter thereby chances in work which means most to me" (Earhart, n.d.). Earhart went on to become not only the most famous woman pilot, but also to hold an appointment during the 1930's at Purdue University as a consultant in the department for the study of the careers of women. Memories of her attempt to fly around the world are documented in her letters to Putnam, whose careful preservation of those communications provides a lasting record to her achievements and the conflicts felt by talented women. (Earhart, n.d.)

Today's academics continue to struggle to balance personal and professional demands, albeit in new ways. Academic couples search unrelentingly for two jobs in one location. Women on the tenure track ponder whether to postpone pregnancy as their biological clocks tick away. Men turn down better job offers that would cause relocation problems in a dual-career family. We in academia often think of our environment as an enlightened one. Could we not set a model for society at large with respect to balance in life for both men and women? Perhaps it is time to step back and consider what kind of a life is worth living and what kind of expectations we as a society should have for both men and women. What could be given up in the world of work that would ensure our children and parents receive the nurturing and care they need? What expectations could we abandon that would make for adults who are not always running on empty?

As an academic with more than twenty-five years of postdoctoral experience in higher education and more than thirty years as the marital partner of a fellow professional, I offer a few simple suggestions.

1. Let us acknowledge that current professional job expectations and full-time parenthood are incompatible. In research universities, ever-increasing demands to publish or perish coincide with the period when most young professionals are also seeking to establish a family. The expectation that one can devote fifty or sixty hours (or more) a week to professional work at the same time one is shuttling kids back and forth to after school activities, doing household chores, and caring for a parent with Alzheimer's disease is unrealistic at best. We need to put our collective feet down and challenge the notion that personal and family lives are not as important as career productivity. If we want to raise children to be emotionally stable, competent adults, we must invest our energies where (and when) they most count. If we want to show our parents the care and concern at the end of their lives that they showed us at the beginning of ours, we will need to reexamine our commitments.

2. Let us support men and women who make choices that represent compromises over their work lives. Indeed, because we have encouraged dual-career families and fuller participation of men in their children's lives, men have begun to encounter the same kind of criticism that women of the past couple of generations have faced. In the days leading up to a recent major PGA golf tournament, both Ernie Els and Phil Mickelson were chided for taking time off the tour to spend with their wives and newborn children. Some commentators even went so far as to suggest that Sergio Garcia and Tiger Woods were more competitive because they did not have wives and families to attend to. Never mind that both Mr. Els and Mr. Mickelson are top ten players with vast fortunes acquired through success on the tour.

Moreover, a brilliant woman or man whose dissertation shows real promise and potential has not wasted a position in a doctoral program if that person chooses not to pursue the highest professional track upon graduation. History is replete with outstanding doctoral graduates whose lives took them in different directions. Many made significant contributions in other ways. In any event, we are mistaken if we equate education with preparation for a specific job. We need to revisit the classical notion that education is for life, not for a career. Let us recognize that Generation X and Generation Y do not necessarily share our single-minded careerism.

3. Let us reject the notion that we are not doing enough—that our publication records are inadequate, that somehow we should have kept up with the (fill-in-the-blank: professional literature, housework, etc.), that we didn't live up to our potential. We should stop looking at our resumes (and those of others) with an eye toward the slumps, the digressions, and the omissions. Instead, focus on the accomplishments and achievements with particular attention to the ways in which we added value to others' lives. When I look at my own vitae, I note not the absence of publications during a couple of years but remember instead the last two years of my mother's life and the closeness we achieved simply through spending

more time with one another. We need to recognize that for all the planning and negotiating of one's career, life sometimes just happens. A spouse becomes ill with cancer, a long-desired child arrives with special needs, or a parent's failing health requires relocation to a nursing home or to the guest bedroom of one's own home.

4. Let us work to support our colleagues and staffs with policies and processes that acknowledge the importance of both work and family. The Family Medical Leave Act was a lifesaver for me during my mother's illness. Resources for emergency childcare for an ill child are cherished by some corporate employees I know. But we can do much, much more. After all, we academics are best known for our cutting-edge ideas.

5. Finally, let us consider what we should *not* do. Policies and practices should not disadvantage one group of employees over another. Women without children should not be expected to do on campus advising while others with children are telecommuting. Evening or weekend teaching assignments should be shared across all faculty rather than reserved for those who are single and childless. Also, we should not blame our employers for the consequences of our choices. Recognize that at particular times in our lives we will need to compromise our career goals for the good of ourselves, our private lives, and our organizations. Faculty at different stages of their careers often make differential contributions in terms of teaching, research, and service. Both we and our institutions should own those choices. If we are not willing to make some of these changes, we will be like the central character in the children's book, *Little Miss Busy*, "who didn't rest all day long, not for a minute, not even for a second" (Hargreaves, 1997).

I am convinced we can reframe our thoughts and behavior about the appropriate balance between the personal and professional halves of our lives. I am also convinced that if we fail to do so, we will lose our best and brightest faculty to work environments that do encourage telecommuting, flexible work hours, and more generous family leave policies. If that happens, it will be the academy's loss as well.

References

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